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Bibi Ferreira, Grande Dame of Brazilian Stage, Dies at 96

Bibi Ferreira in “Man of La Mancha” in 1966. She brought that and two other Broadway musicals, “My Fair Lady” and “Hello, Dolly!,” to Brazil, and played the lead female role in all three. via Raman e Montenegro Arts Institute

By [Daniel E. Slotnik](#)

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Bibi Ferreira, an indefatigable grande dame of the Brazilian stage who performed internationally and helped bring Broadway musicals to Brazil in the 1960s, died on Feb. 13 at her home in Rio de Janeiro. She was 96.

Her death was confirmed by Júnior Amaro, the producer of her New York shows.

Ms. Ferreira, who sang in English, French and Spanish as well as Portuguese, began acting when she was a child and continued performing well into her 90s — although she did not make her New York debut until 2013. Her voice was powerful but protean, capable of making material identified with artists like Édith Piaf and [Frank Sinatra](#) entirely her own.

“Ms. Ferreira is a chameleon known for her probing, psychologically layered portrayals and the sweeping grandeur of her singing,” the music journalist James Gavin [wrote in an article in The New York Times](#) of her last performance in New York. It was 2016, and she was 94.

Beginning in the early 1960s, Ms. Ferreira starred in Portuguese translations of three Broadway musicals that became widely popular in Brazil. She was Eliza Doolittle in “My Fair Lady,” Dolly Gallagher Levi in “Hello, Dolly!” and Aldonza in “Man of La Mancha.”

In 1975 she starred in “[Gota d’Agua](#),” a hit reworking of the Greek tragedy “Medea” set in an impoverished neighborhood in Brazil. The show featured music by the celebrated songwriter and novelist Chico Buarque and was written by Paulo Pontes, Ms. Ferreira’s husband at the time.

Ms. Ferreira was closely identified with her interpretation of Piaf’s work, which began in 1983 with a Portuguese version of the play “Piaf,” by the British playwright Pam Gems, that she performed in Brazil and Portugal. Piaf songs remained a favorite part of her repertoire for the rest of her career.

“She was the real voice, singing on the streets, never learning music,” Ms. Ferreira said of Piaf in 2016. “She only cared about two things: love and love.”

Although Ms. Ferreira was beloved in Brazil and familiar to audiences around the world, she was little known to audiences in the United States until 2013, when she played a packed, one-night engagement at Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully

Hall.

Ms. Ferreira performed songs made famous by Édith Piaf at Town Hall in Manhattan in 2013. Piaf's songs were an important part of her repertoire for more than 30 years.

Mauro Salviano

She returned twice more. On her last visit, she performed a one-woman show, “Bibi Times Four,” at Symphony Space on the Upper West Side. The show included songs by the Argentine singer, songwriter, composer and tango master Carlos Gardel and the Portuguese fado singer Amália Rodrigues, as well as Piaf and Sinatra.

She acknowledged that some people thought performing at her age might be dangerous. But she called such concerns “silly.”

“People are worried about me, and they shouldn’t be,” she said. “Now I’m 94, and I sing better every day.”

Abigail Izquierdo Ferreira was born in Rio de Janeiro on June 1, 1922, to Aída Izquierdo, a dancer, and Procópio Ferreira, an actor and director. She said that her life practically began onstage: She first appeared before an audience when she was about a month old, as a last-minute stand-in for a lost baby doll. Her godmother, the actress Abigail Maia, suggested that she take the place of the doll in a production of Oduvaldo Vianna’s “Sunny Mornings” that featured both of her parents.

Ms. Ferreira studied at an American diplomatic school in Rio, because a local Catholic school would not accept the daughter of entertainers, since they were widely considered disreputable at the time. She danced all over South America, beginning when she was about 3; studied ballet and opera; played the piano, violin and guitar; and learned several languages.

In 1941 she appeared in her first lead role in a major production with her father in a Rio de Janeiro production of “The Mistress of the Inn,” by the Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni. She remained with her father’s theater company until 1944, when she formed her own. That company performed Portuguese translations of plays by Oscar Wilde and Joseph Kesselring as well as an original play by Ms. Ferreira, “Angelus.”

She appeared in a few movies — notably “The End of the River” (1947), with the Indian actor Sabu — but most of her career was spent on the stage.

Ms. Ferreira was married many times — she was usually vague about exactly how many, but when pressed often told interviewers that the number was five. She told The Times that she was “born to be married,” adding, “Well, marriage shouldn’t be long.”

Her marriage to Mr. Pontes ended with his [death in 1976](#). She is survived by a half sister, Lígia Ferreira; a daughter from her marriage to Armando Pinto Martins, Teresa Cristina Ferreira; two grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.



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